Information Literacy: Processes for Finding, Presenting and Utilising Business Information

Topic 1:

Information Literacy Overview

AGSL

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Introduction

The environment that we live in today is increasingly being described as an "information society". In other words, our economy is information-driven and we are bombarded day by day with an ever increasing volume of information. Just think of the number of emails you received today compared with five years ago. In order to be able to succeed in such an environment businesspeople need to be information literate, they need to be able to manage the information they deal with and make the optimal use of their time and information resources.

This mini-subject aims to help you develop your information literacy and therefore your ability to deal with information and make informed business decisions.

This first topic, *Information literacy overview,* provides a brief overview of information literacy and its importance and role in the business context. Topic 2, *Finding relevant information*, deals with information sources and planning and undertaking business research. Topic 3, *Analysing and synthesising*, provides approaches to analysing concepts and ideas within the information collected and synthesising this information to enable clear and coherent communication of the ideas presented. Topic 4, *Business reports and presentations*, outlines the components of a typical business report and also provides some tips for business presentations.

Information Overload and Information Literacy

Information overload is a problem that all businesspeople have to deal with. However, information is integral to the successful functioning of business (Edmunds & Morris, 2000) in an information-driven economy. Information overload can adversely affect our ability to process information and the subsequent quality of decision making (Iselin, 1988, p. 147) and therefore information overload is a priority issue that must be addressed.

Even by 1997, information overload was becoming a significant problem:

> "…two thirds of managers claimed that they needed lots of information to make decisions or perform effectively and half believe that information collection is necessary to keep up with colleagues, while nearly half complained that they were unable to handle the volume of information that they received" (Oppenheim, 1997, p246).

Information literacy has been suggested as a way to deal with information overload. It involves:

> "critical thinking, an awareness of personal and professional ethics, information evaluation, conceptualising information needs, organising information, interacting with information professionals and making effective use of information in problem-solving, decision-making and research" (Bruce, 1999, p46).

In essence, information literacy is about skilfully obtaining and manipulating information.

Information literacy standards from the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework (Bundy, 2004) are provided for further reference in the Appendix to this document.

Why is Information Literacy Important in Business?

Given a specified business concern, most managers will develop action recommendations based on understandings and insights that draw upon:

- Known and accessible internal sources of information
- Their own personal relevant experiences
- To a lesser extent, relevant external sources.

This typical profile of information sources consulted significantly reduces the quality of the decisions that are being made.

By becoming information literate, you are able to gain an expanded understanding of the context of the business concern. In a rapidly changing situation, this provides the decision maker with a potential competitive advantage. Contextual understanding is critical to developing holistic consideration of the concern, which in turn can reduce the potential for unintended consequences to occur. Contextual understanding also facilitates the search for analogies that could provide insights for action recommendations.

Reviewing relevant and credible literature provides a greater understanding of the context within which a concern is being dealt with and therefore increases the chances of homing in on useful information.

> [T]he amount of time wasted in futile searching for vital information is enormous, leading to staggering costs to the enterprise (Feldman & Sherman, 2001, p. 1).

Finding, Presenting and Using Business Information

A basic model of business research can be built on Carol Kuhlthau's (1993) model of the information search process:

- Initiation -- recognising the need for business information and specifying its source
- Exploration -- investigating the general topic of understanding, focusing on the topic, gathering information on the topic
- Documentation -- completing the search and preparing to use the findings.

Business Information Needs

Business research in general and literature reviews in particular, are typically performed prior to making some significant business decision... And while a good business decision requires more than accurate and reliable information, it's unlikely that a good decision can be based on bad information.

Your credibility is on the line whenever you provide information to another party, as you are implicitly vouching for its accuracy, simply by choosing to pass it along (Berkman, 2004, p. 8-9).

Situations that will require information can be characterised as follows (Thivant, 2005, p. 6-7):

- **New situation**: a new situation is one in which managers are confronted with a totally or partially new situation. They have never or almost never been in such a situation before. Information seeking and use behaviour will be new and might require novel strategies.
- **Fact-driven situation**: this situation is driven by the facts found during information seeking and use processes. Managers have to seek relevant information and decide to go further in the same direction. They will have then to deals with facts and elements already discovered.
- **Problematical situation**: this situation is delicate and managers stand back from their searches. Managers capitalise on their own experiences to find solutions and draw some new conclusions.

You will typically need to undertake some form of business research in any one of the following situations (adapted from Chowdhury, 2004, p. 197-198):

1. Formulating objectives of the organisation or business unit
2. Formulating major strategies and policies to meet specific objectives
3. Preparing plans
4. Reporting to the board of management about the results of action taken
5. Informing employees about the status and performance of the organisation
6. Providing bases and background so that decisions can be made about specific matters as they arise
7. Providing bases for giving pre-action approval
8. Keeping abreast of current operations and developments in the business concerned
9. Being aware of possible troubles and problems ahead
10. Allocating capital resources
11. Exercising control over day-to-day operations
12. Training staff
13. Improving personnel management and public relations

Feldman & Sherman (2001, p. 5-6) have suggested that a lack of appropriate information can result in:

- Poor decisions based on inaccurate or incomplete information
- Duplicated effort because more than one business unit works on the same project without knowing it has already been done
- Lost sales because customers can't find the information they need on products or services and give up in frustration
- Lost productivity because employees can't find the information they need on the intranet and have to resort to asking for help from colleagues

Appendix: Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework

Bundy, A. (ed.) (2004) *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework*, 2 edn, Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy, Adelaide.

The principles frame six core standards which underpin information literacy acquisition, understanding and application by an individual. These standards propose that the information literate person

1. *recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed*
2. *finds needed information effectively and efficiently*
3. *critically evaluates information and the information seeking process*
4. *manages information collected or generated*
5. *applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings*
6. *uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information*

Standard One

The information literate person recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed.

1.1 defines and articulates the information need

- explores general information sources to increase familiarity with the topic
- identifies key concepts and terms in order to formulate and focus questions
- defines or modifies the information need to achieve a manageable focus
- may confer with others to identify a research topic or other information need

1.2 understands the purpose, scope and appropriateness of a variety of information sources

- understands how information is organised and disseminated, recognising the context of the topic in the discipline
- differentiates between and values, the variety of potential sources of information
- identifies the intended purpose and audience of potential resources eg popular vs scholarly, current vs historical
- differentiates between primary and secondary sources, recognising how their use and importance vary with each discipline

1.3 re-evaluates the nature and extent of the information need

- reviews the initial information needed to clarify, revise, or refine the question
- articulates and uses criteria to make information decisions and choices

1.4 uses diverse sources of information to inform decisions

- understands that different sources will present different perspectives
- uses a range of sources to understand the issues
- uses information for decision making and problem solving

Standard Two

The information literate person finds needed information effectively and efficiently.

2.1 selects the most appropriate methods or tools for finding information

- identifies appropriate investigative methods eg laboratory experiment, simulation, fieldwork
- investigates benefits and applicability of various investigative methods
- investigates the scope, content and organisation of information access tools
- consults with librarians and other information professionals to help identify information access tools

2.2 constructs and implements effective search strategies

- develops a search plan appropriate to the investigative method
- identifies keywords, synonyms and related terms for the information needed
- selects appropriate controlled vocabulary or a classification specific to the discipline or information access tools
- constructs and implements a search strategy using appropriate commands
- implements the search using investigative methodology appropriate to the discipline

2.3 obtains information using appropriate methods

- uses various information access tools to retrieve information in a variety of formats
- uses appropriate services to retrieve information needed eg document delivery, professional associations, institutional research offices, community resources, experts and practitioners
- uses surveys, letters, interviews and other forms of inquiry to retrieve primary information

2.4 keeps up to date with information sources, information technologies, information access tools and investigative methods

- maintains awareness of changes in information and communications technology
- uses alert/current awareness services
- subscribes to listservs and discussion groups
- habitually browses print and electronic sources

Standard Three

The information literate person critically evaluates information and the information seeking process.

3.1 assesses the usefulness and relevance of the information obtained

- assesses the quantity, quality and relevance of the search results to determine whether alternative information access tools or investigative methods should be utilised
- identifies gaps in the information retrieved and determines if the search strategy should be revised
- repeats the search using the revised strategy as necessary

3.2 defines and applies criteria for evaluating information

- examines and compares information from various sources to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness and point of view or bias
- analyses the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods
- recognises and questions prejudice, deception, or manipulation
- recognises the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information
- recognises and understands own biases and cultural context

3.3 reflects on the information seeking process and revises search strategies as necessary

- determines if original information need has been satisfied or if additional information is needed
- reviews the search strategy
- reviews information access tools used and expands to include others as needed
- recognises that the information search process is evolutionary and nonlinear

Standard Four

The information literate person manages information collected or generated.

4.1 records information and its sources

- organises the content in a manner that supports the purposes and format of the product eg outlines, drafts, storyboards
- differentiates between the types of sources cited and understands the elements and correct citation style for a wide range of resources
- records all pertinent citation information for future reference and retrieval

4.2 organises (orders/classifies/stores) information

- compiles references in the required bibliographic format
- creates a system for organising and managing the information obtained eg EndNote, card files

Standard Five

The information literate person applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings.

5.1 compares and integrates new understandings with prior knowledge to determine the value added, contradictions, or other unique characteristics of the information

- determines whether information satisfies the research or other information need and whether the information contradicts or verifies information used from other sources
- recognises interrelationships between concepts and draws conclusions based upon information gathered
- selects information that provides evidence for the topic and summarises the main ideas extracted from the information gathered
- understands that information and knowledge in any discipline is in part a social construction and is subject to change as a result of ongoing dialogue and research
- extends initial synthesis at a higher level of abstraction to construct new hypotheses

5.2 communicates knowledge and new understandings effectively

- chooses a communication medium and format that best supports the purposes of the product and the intended audience
- uses a range of appropriate information technology applications in creating the product

- incorporates principles of design and communication appropriate to the environment
- communicates clearly and in a style to support the purposes of the intended audience

Standard Six

The information literate person uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information.

6.1 acknowledges cultural, ethical and socioeconomic issues related to access to and use of, information

- identifies and can articulate issues related to privacy and security in the print and electronic environments
- identifies and understands issues related to censorship and freedom of speech
- understands and respects Indigenous and multicultural perspectives of using information

6.2 recognises that information is underpinned by values and beliefs

- identifies whether there are differing values that underpin new information or whether information has implications for personal values and beliefs
- applies reasoning to determine whether to incorporate or reject viewpoints encountered
- maintains an internally coherent set of values informed by knowledge and experience

6.3 conforms with conventions and etiquette related to access to and use of, information

- demonstrates an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and correctly acknowledges the work and ideas of others
- participates in electronic discussions following accepted practices eg Netiquette

6.4 legally obtains, stores and disseminates text, data, images, or sounds

- understands fair dealing in respect of the acquisition and dissemination of educational and research materials
- respects the access rights of all users and does not damage information resources
- obtains, stores and disseminates text, data, images, or sounds in a legal manner
- demonstrates an understanding of intellectual property, copyright and fair use of copyrighted material

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